

Leigh Clifford AO
Address to the University of South Australia
Graduation Ceremony - 15 August 2017

Thank you and my congratulations to you all on your achievements.

As a South Australian by birth – Loxton to be exact – I’m especially pleased and proud to be able to address you today.

As I look back on my graduation I’m trying to remember the wise words imparted to me – and to be honest I can’t remember what was said or who said it.

What I do remember was how pleased my Dad, who had just returned that day from London, was that I made it through.

As it turned out, I spent another couple of years getting my Masters of Engineering Science.

Well enough of history what can I say to you?

You should feel a real sense of achievement – I’m sure your families are rightly proud for your hard work to get to this point.

Leaving university and embarking on a career is a very exciting time. But it can also leave you feeling some trepidation.

All I can say to you is that many have trodden the path before you. And I think it’s also true that each generation faces its own unique set of challenges depending on the times.

Today, in 2017, you will embark into a world which is changing faster than ever before.

Technology is impacting to a greater degree than when I left university in 1970.

I spent a week or so in Silicon Valley recently. I was briefed not on change, but on “digital disruption”. What staggered me was the pace and the extent of the disruption. Ten years ago, it would be hard to imagine companies like Uber, Tesla and Airbnb would challenge very established players in transport, automotive and hotels by turning business models on their heads. We’ve never really seen this pace of change before.

For some, graduating will enable you to expand the opportunities in your chosen field. For others, you are about to embark on your first career. It’s like a step into the unknown. Different opportunities, perhaps in different locations, will present themselves.

At the start of my career, as a mining engineer with a Masters in Geomechanics, heading up the Sunraysia Highway for Broken Hill, I didn't expect to be still be working at Rio Tinto 37 years later as its CEO and spend 11 of those years in Chelsea, London.

Later, there was a moment of trepidation when I first moved to live and work in London – the edge of my experience envelope. When I look back now – as do my wife and daughters – it was a fabulous experience.

Whilst we have much in common with the UK – there are many differences. The challenge was to adapt to the different environment. I'm sure in your careers you will encounter such challenges.

As you know, challenges can sometimes bring disappointment. You will have setbacks along the way, including as you establish yourself in your chosen field (or fields). As the saying goes – “experience is the thing you receive after you have needed it most”. In other words, going through a challenge, and being disappointed, can often give you the skills you need to succeed the next time around. The trick is to dust yourself off and have the resilience to try again.

My background is in Engineering – very different from many of you – but from my experience as we progress the careers of people with widely different backgrounds intersect.

Over the years I have had to deal with politicians, bureaucrats, technicians and academics. That young engineer heading to Broken Hill would never have envisaged negotiating with the Presidents of Mongolia, Madagascar or Bolivia.

And perhaps that is the most important thing about getting an education. It can open doors to experiences and pathways that you may not have access to otherwise. Your learning, of course, will carry on long after you leave here.

Throughout your careers, you'll come across people from all walks of life. There is plenty of diversity of thought on campus, I'm sure – but as you work in various organisations and perhaps in different cities or countries, you'll come across many points of view. And some of them might really challenge how you see the world.

It's crucial to be open to different perspectives. To listen first, and respond second. Having respect for others – even when your gut reaction is to disagree – is a crucial skill. And it's particularly crucial if you're going to lead a team, big or small.

So in summary, good luck and seize every opportunity and “Carpe Diem”.